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Cover picture: Rhododendrons.

Note: All Bible quotations are taken from the New King James Version except where another version is indicated after the text.

Religious Groups in Bible Times

The Rabbi

RABBI means ‘master’, ‘teacher’ or ‘guide’. The word Rabbi came to be used as the title of the authorised teachers of the Law of Moses. The Rabbis were not priests, they had no part in temple services for that was the province of the Levites. To understand the role of the Rabbi, it will help if we remember that before the time of Jesus there were two main groups of Jews, one in Israel and another in Babylonia (the same geographical area as Iraq and Iran).

PHARISEES, SADDUCEES AND SCRIBES

Within these two Jewish groups, there arose smaller groups known in the Bible as the Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes. The Pharisees held the Old Testament Scriptures as inspired by God, but they also accepted the Oral Traditions of Jewish teachers, as equally inspired and authoritative. The scribes mostly belonged to the Pharisees group. Scribes were educated literate officials employed originally by the priesthood and the royal households. The Sadducees were the other main party from the land-owning classes. They only accepted the Five Books of Moses as God’s Word.

But the Jewish people also had other writings based on written and oral interpretations of the Law of Moses. Examples are the ‘Mishnah’ and the ‘Talmud’. Then there are further commentaries on them. These collections of writings are still in use today in Jewish circles. Before the time of Jesus, it seems that any man who had a good knowledge of

the Old Testament Scriptures and these extra writings and was able to expound them, was readily accepted as a Teacher of the Law – in other words a Lawyer.

THE SCHOOLS OF HILLEL & SHAMMAI

By the time of Jesus, there had developed in the Jewish ruling classes two powerful groups of lawyers - who lived by and taught from these writings. Schools were established and led by two learned men, Hillel and Shammai. Hillel and Shammai were probably still alive during the boyhood of Jesus, but do not appear to be on the scene when Jesus began his ministry. But their interpretations and teachings were very much in use in Israel when Jesus was preaching there. The School founded by Shammai advocated a strict, literal interpretation of Jewish law, competing with the School of Hillel, which offered more flexible interpretations.

However, the title 'Rabbi' was not used by these two respected sages of Israel. It seems to have been used by those who were ordained by the Sanhedrin (a name given to the ruling Jewish council led by the high priest). The name 'Rabbi' was used as a courteous title of address. It was certainly a title of honour, applied by some to John Baptist and to Jesus, in the Biblical record.

THE TALMUDIC PERIOD

This period of time is described in Jewish history as the Talmudic period. The function of the Rabbi of the Talmud, was to teach the members of the community the Scriptures and the oral and traditional laws. But it was an honorary position without payment. So we find that the Rabbis had other occupations. Hillel, for example earned a half-denarius a day as a wood-chopper. Shammai was a builder, others were blacksmiths, tanners, laundrymen, shoemakers, tailors, carpenters, merchants or farmers. This principle of Rabbi's working for a living comes out in the Bible, where we find that the Apostle Paul was by trade a 'tent-maker', but he was also a lawyer – a Pharisee.

CHANGES TOOK PLACE

When the rule of the Kings ended in Israel, with the Temple destroyed and the Jews dispersed into captivity, changes began to take place. Even though the Temple was eventually rebuilt, the dispersed Jews found it difficult, or impossible to get to the Temple to worship, so the priests began to lose their influence and we see a new form of religious hierarchy emerge.

THE AGE OF THE SYNAGOGUE

The Jews constructed smaller buildings called Synagogues wherever they had settled. Nazareth in Galilee where Jesus lived had a synagogue, the Bible tells us Jesus used it. But the people who ruled the synagogues in this new set-up, were the Rabbi's.



Ruins of ancient synagogue at Capernaum

The Scribes particularly, after the Exile, assumed the role of copyists and preservers and interpreters of the Law. By the time of Jesus, they had also become an important body of lawyers and were addressed as 'Rabbi'. Jesus referred to the way they dressed up in finery, loved the

best seats in the synagogues and loved to be greeted as ‘Rabbi’ [Matthew 23.6–8]. However, in the same chapter Jesus said that they ‘*sit in Moses seat*’ [verse 2] and that people were to take note of their teaching. But then we see how Jesus denounced them as ‘*hypocrites*!’ [verse 13].

The whole of Matthew Chapter 23 is a condemnation by Jesus of these men and their interpretations of God’s Laws, which as Jesus points out, had deviated from the Law’s original meaning. He repeats over and over that they were ‘*Teachers of the Law*’, but they were, ‘*blind guides*’. They were teachers, Rabbi’s who, ‘*let go of the commands of God...holding on to the traditions of men*’ and ‘*Nullify the word of God by your traditions that you have handed down*’ [Mark 7. 8,13 NIV].

NICODEMUS

But they weren’t all like that. A Pharisee named Nicodemus who was a Rabbi, came to Jesus. He recognised Jesus as, ‘*a teacher come from God*’ [John 3. 1.2]. Later, Jesus said to him, (after a discussion about the need for baptism) ‘*Are you the teacher of Israel and do not know these things?*’ [verse 10]. But afterwards, this man was faithful and brave enough to link himself to Jesus. He protested to the Jewish council (Sanhedrin) about the arrest of Jesus, ‘*Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?*’ [John 7. 51]. Here we have a genuine Rabbi, applying the original principles of the Law.

JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA

Joseph of Arimathea was also a Rabbi and a secret disciple of Jesus. He is clearly described as ‘*a prominent council member*’ [Mark 15.43]. He went ‘*boldly*’ to the Roman governor, Pilate, to get permission to take the body of Jesus. The motive behind this action, was that he ‘*waited for the kingdom of God*’ [Mark 15.43].

Joseph wanted to prevent Christ’s body from hanging on the cross overnight and wanted to secure an honourable burial. So here he was

going against Jewish Law, which gave a disgraceful burial to an executed person. Later we learn that Joseph met Nicodemus and between them they carefully buried the body of Jesus in a new tomb [John 19.38, 39].

GAMALIEL

Gamaliel is another Rabbi who is mentioned twice in the New Testament. He is also named in Jewish history. He was one of a select group of masters of the Jewish Oral Law.

In the book of Acts, we read how Gamaliel intervened on behalf of the apostles. They had been seized and brought before the Sanhedrin Council. Once there though, the apostles boldly condemned the Council for putting Jesus to death. So we read:

‘.. they were furious and took counsel to kill them. Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people .. ‘I say to you, keep away from these men .. if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it – lest you even be found to fight against God’ [Acts 5.33-39].

The reasoning of Rabbi Gamaliel shows not only his wisdom, but that he could see that these men were no ordinary criminals, they were Holy Spirit guided followers of Jesus. We also see here the influence he had in the Sanhedrin, ‘*they agreed with him*’ [verse 40], and the apostles were spared.

Gamaliel is mentioned again when Paul, made a speech to the Jews and told them that he had been a student of Gamaliel: ‘*...brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers’ law*’ [Acts 22. 3]. This claim by Paul, was like saying, ‘I was taught by the top lawyer in the country’, and it also tells us that Paul was a trained Rabbi.

THE RISE OF RABBINISM

The Schools set up by the Rabbis developed into academies where men gained certification and were then officially allowed to practice as a Rabbi. The Rabbinate took over the traditional basic practices and institutions. The Rabbi's took charge of the legal, judicial, and congregational roles.

In the time of Jesus, the head of the Jewish community in Palestine was also a Roman imperial official, but the Roman's were quite happy to let their subject peoples run their own affairs, within limits. The President of the Sanhedrin was allowed to appoint Rabbis to the law courts and as legal officers of local communities. With the local elders, they supervised and controlled the life of the community and its members in all of its aspects. This arrangement continued for centuries.

MORE CHANGES

Jewish communal life now went through another transformation. As time went by the Rabbinate became, for the most part, an ecclesiastical agency. It bent to the requirements of civic life in the countries they lived in. In modern times it has reached a point where the Rabbi has now become like the people who serve in our churches. The education of Rabbis is now carried out in seminaries.

ORTHODOX RESISTANCE

But there was one group of Jews who resisted these changes, these were Ultra-Orthodox Jews, led by Rabbis who were still interpreting the Law their way. It was from Eastern European Rabbinic institutions that the strange styles of dress have come from, such as we see worn by some male Jews. Some of the Rabbis in those communities had such a powerful influence and slave-like following, that the men-folk still wear the same style of dress that their particular Rabbi wore when he was alive.

Today the majority of graduates serve as congregational rabbis, in

roles similar to those of ministers and priests in Christian Churches. Even in the modern State of Israel, in certain areas such as family law, judgements are still made by the Rabbinate.

THE SYNAGOGUE RULERS

In Christ's time, most of the towns and villages in Israel had their own synagogues and each had their own Council. It was in these synagogues that the Scribes and Pharisees based themselves. It was like the town hall in our system of civil life. It was not only their seat of learning. It was the place for the local administration of law and justice, led by the Rabbis.

The Bible tells us how Jesus used the synagogue in his home town at Nazareth. He went there to discuss the Scriptures and to take part in the services. The Rabbi in charge there recognised his outstanding ability and asked him to read and to speak. Jesus made use of the synagogue wherever he went preaching, he knew that if he went there, where the Rabbi's were, and taught from God's Word, he would get a ready hearing.

WAS JESUS A RABBI ?

Jesus told his disciples not to allow themselves to be called Rabbi, because the Scribes and Pharisees loved it. He said to them; *'But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for one is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren' [Matthew 23.8]*. Jesus made clear to them that he was their Teacher – their Rabbi. But he didn't want to use this title and be associated with these men he was so vehemently condemning.

The more we look into this occupation of the Rabbi, we can see that many of the Jewish people looked up to Jesus as a Rabbi, because they saw he was a man who spoke with great authority. When we think about it, to be there in person, to hear Jesus speak about God's laws and commandments would be something, the like of which people had never heard before. For here was a man steeped in God's Word, gifted with Spirit power and understanding, more able than anyone to explain the real meaning of the Scriptures.

Blind Bartimaeus addressed Jesus as 'Rabboni', so did Mary Magdalene at his resurrection (see Mark 10.51 and John 20.16). 'Rabboni' is a heightened form of Rabbi almost entirely applied to the president of the Sanhedrin. It was even more respectful than Rabbi, and signified, 'My great Master'. We can see how they viewed Jesus.

So Jesus stood out as a bright light, a **great light**, in the dark, bewildering world of Jewish Rabbinic learning and tradition that the people were subjected to. But as we study the events recorded, where they questioned him and discussed the Scriptures with him, maybe it wasn't all cynicism, or always people trying to trap him.

Some genuinely saw him as a **great teacher**, an outstanding **rabbi**. Many followed him, hanging on his every word and some of these followers may well have become Christians later.

Yes, Jesus was **a rabbi**, in the fullest sense. He was and is the **rabbi of rabbis!** He is the **teacher of teachers!** He is our **master** and our **guide!** The Son of God whose wealth of instruction found in the Bible has fortunately come down to us today. His invitation to you and me is in great contrast to those '**heavy burdens**' [Matthew 23.4] that the Rabbis of his day imposed on the people:

'Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and **my burden is light**' [Matthew 11.28-30].

We do well to listen and learn from his wonderful words and try to live our lives by them.

Ken Dennis
Kent, UK



From our Mail Bag

WE have received the following question from a reader, which is probably of interest to the wider readership and therefore the question and the Bible's answer is given below.

'Where is the place of Lucifer the fallen angel, who according to the teaching of some Christians is a supernatural being who controls world affairs and masterminds the act of sin'?

By looking at a Bible concordance it will soon become apparent that only one verse in the Bible refers to Lucifer and that is in Isaiah which states: *'How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations' [Isaiah 14.12]*. The following verses in this chapter show that Lucifer is claiming to be greater than God but in the end will be brought down to *'sheol'* (Hebrew word for the grave). That hardly seems to portray a powerful supernatural fallen angel that continues to have power over the world and everyone in it.

A Bible concordance tells us that the word Lucifer in the original Hebrew of the old Testament is *'helel'*, and means *'shining one'* but it also goes on to say that this is a description of the king of Babylon who ruled around 720 years before Christ, around the same time as the prophet Isaiah. **But is this definition correct?**

Closer examination of Isaiah chapter 14 shows that the prophet was asked to take up a proverb against the king of Babylon (see verse 4)

and then goes on to explain that the all powerful king with ideas of grandeur and world domination will come to his end. The king of Babylon was the man who made the world like a desert and would not release the captives (see verse 17) and ultimately the great city Babylon would become a ruin with no natural descendants [verses 22,23].

In the IVP Bible Dictionary or the NIV Study Bible the same conclusion is reached and it seems quite obvious, so why has a myth been created around Lucifer to demonstrate this symbol as an all powerful supernatural being that frustrated and continues to frustrate God's plans? It seems that the wrong conclusion is reached because of the incorrect proposition that people are led to sin by an outside influence rather than taking responsibility for their own actions.

The letter of James makes the position very clear: *'each one is tempted when he is **drawn away by his own desires** and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death'* [James 1.14,15]. James was endorsing the clear message of Jesus: *'out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies'* [Matthew 15.19]. Sin is personal and stems from the lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes and the pride of life as it is put by John (see 1 John 1.16) and takes us back to the temptation in the garden of Eden and from that first pair we all inherit sinful, mortal nature.

So whilst the wages of sin is death, we can thank Jesus for his sinless life that gives us the hope of eternity with him. This is a gift from God the supreme creator and sustainer of all life and is not subject to the alleged misdeeds of a fallen angel (See Romans 6.23).

Correspondence Secretary

Bible teaching about...

Miracles

What is a miracle? A Bible dictionary gives this definition: '*an extraordinary event, inexplicable in terms of ordinary natural forces*'. With just a casual study we can see the majority of miracles recorded in the Bible occurred mainly in three different time periods.

THE EXODUS PERIOD

The first of these periods was at the time of the Exodus, when God brought the children of Israel from the slavery in Egypt to the promised land. One of God's faithful servants Moses, played a great part and witnessed many of these great miracles, like the ten plagues in Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea. Afterwards Joshua led the Israelites across the river Jordan and witnessed the fall of Jericho. It was no accident that miracles came at this time. It was at a time of great spiritual depression. God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, constituted them a nation at Sinai and brought them to the promised land. In their subsequent history, God's people have looked back on those particular miracles of that Exodus period as a type of divine salvation. In these amazing events is a clue to the purpose of miracles.

THE PERIOD OF THE JUDGES AND THE KINGS

After this first period of miracles there followed a long spiritual decline in the time of the Judges which was interspersed with miracles. There was then a time of great revival during the reigns of David and Solomon. During this time miracles were very few. Then came another period of idolatrous compromise matched by a series of miracles during the ministry of the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

THE NEW TESTAMENT PERIOD

The greatest period of miracles occurred during the ministry of Jesus and his apostles. That these three periods of miracles happened when they did, was no coincidence. They were all times which lacked that true worship and belief which God required. At the Exodus God's own people had forgotten His name. At the time of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, God had been relegated in favour of Baal worship. At the time of Christ, the religious leaders were opposed to the preaching of Jesus and eventually they were instrumental in his death.

Almost forty demonstrative miracles were performed by Jesus, which are recorded in the four Gospel records. Perhaps we now ought to ask the question why were these miracles performed? The obvious answer would be that some miracles restored people back to life, some were healed of their diseases and others were relieved from desperate situations. Undoubtedly each person would have benefited from his or her own particular problem. But these were just a means to an end.

THE PROPHET ELIJAH

Before we look at the New Testament period, let us examine two Old Testament miracles. In I Kings chapter 17 we note that the prophet Elijah performed two miracles. The first miracle was in connection with a severe drought. Elijah was told the means of his survival. God said: *'Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. See, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you' [I Kings 17.9]*. But all she had, because of the drought was a handful of flour and a little oil *[verse 12]*. Miraculously, the flour and oil never diminished at all during the time she looked after Elijah *[verse 15]*.

The second miracle concerned this widow's son who was sick and we read *'his sickness was so serious that there was no breath left in him' [verse 17]*. Going briefly through the details, we note that Elijah stretched himself three times upon the child and prayed *'O LORD my God...let this child's soul come back to him. Then the LORD heard the*

voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came back to him again, and he revived. The outcome is given in the last verse of this chapter: *'Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now by this (the miracles) I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is the truth"' [verse 24].*

THE MIRACLES OF JESUS

Turning to the New Testament miracles in the time of the ministry of Jesus Christ we will find exactly the same principle applies. At the end of John's gospel record we read: *'truly Jesus did' many other signs (miracles) in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye may have life in his name' [John 20.31].* In this particular verse we have the two-fold purpose of his miracles. Firstly they demonstrated his divine son-ship, and secondly that we might have eternal life through him if we believe.

Miracles were not performed just to make a spectacular display, equally they were not regarded as an end in themselves. Many of the Old Testament prophets predicted that the Messiah (Hebrew word for Christ) would come and the miracles he performed were a proof of his Messiahship. They fulfilled the prediction of one of Israel's prophets concerning him. These words have a dual application, which we will explain later: *'Say to those who are fearful-hearted, "Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; he will come and save you". Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing' [Isaiah 35.4-6].*

JOHN THE BAPTIST

When Jesus was born, not many were looking for him. However, John the Baptist was looking and the Bible tells us that he was sent to prepare the way for Jesus. John's disciples had obviously seen Jesus at work and had told John, and he had to know whether this really was Jesus the Christ. We can read the narrative in the gospel record of

Luke: *‘And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to Jesus, saying, “Are you the Coming One, or do we look for another...Then Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them”’ [Luke 7.19-21].* So John the Baptist had the assurance that Jesus was who he said he was, because of those miracles he was able to perform in the presence of many people.

Later, Jesus sent his disciples to proclaim that same gospel message they had heard from his lips. The message was about *‘the glad tidings (gospel) of the kingdom of God’ [Luke 8.1].* The gospel message was also accompanied by miracles of healing which were to be understood as signs. In this way they were a foretaste of Christ’s universal work in the future when he shall reign on earth over the kingdom of God.

It is not without good reason that the writers of the four gospels describe many of Christ’s miracles in considerable detail. These details all contribute to the instructive nature of the miracles, and are profitable to study. Most of Jesus’ work was amongst his own countrymen. His primary mission was *‘to the lost sheep of the house of Israel [Matthew 15.24].* It was only later that the benefits of his saving work were extended to the Gentiles.

TWO SIGNIFICANT MIRACLES

Twice during his ministry Jesus had occasion to comment on the faith he found among the Gentiles (non-Jews) and on each occasion this faith was rewarded. We will now look at these two events which are both recorded in Matthew’s gospel record. The first event is the healing of the centurion’s servant. We read:

‘Now when Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, pleading with him, saying “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralysed, dreadfully tormented”. And Jesus said to him, “I will come and heal him”. The centurion answered and said, “Lord, I am not worthy that

you should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, ‘Go’, and he goes; and to another, ‘Come’, and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this’, and he does it”. When Jesus heard it, he marvelled and said to those who followed...“I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!”...Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you”. And his servant was healed that same hour’ [*Matthew 8.5-13*].

The second event concerns a Gentile woman:

‘Then Jesus...departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a woman of Canaan...cried out to him, saying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed”. But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away”...But he...said, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”. Then she came and worshipped him, saying, “Lord, help me!” But he answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs”. And she said, “True, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master’s table”. Then Jesus... said to her, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.’

[*Matthew 15.21-28*]

Two significant facts should be noted from these events. Firstly, Jesus was able to heal people who were not even present, but at a distance and secondly, these particular examples illustrate how Christ’s miracles, in addition to benefiting the recipient, were also intended to instruct in the ways of God, all who witnessed them. Reading further on in this chapter it is apparent that this particular miracle had a great

affect on the people of that locality. *‘...multitudes came to him, having with them those who were lame, blind, mute, maimed, and many others; and they laid them down at Jesus’ feet, and he healed them. So the multitude marvelled when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed made whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel [Matthew 15.30,31].*

THE RAISING OF LAZARUS

Another miracle to look at is the raising of Lazarus which is recorded only by John. In the town of Bethany lived two sisters, Martha and Mary with their brother Lazarus. Jesus knew these three and he would often stay at their house. We are also told that Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus [*John 11.5*]. Lazarus became very ill and the two sisters in their desperation sent Jesus this message: *‘Lord, behold, he whom you love is sick’ [verse 3]*. Jesus responded in an unexpected way: *‘when he heard that he was sick, he stayed two more days in the place where he was’ [verse 6]*.

During this time of delay Jesus became aware that Lazarus had died and he told the disciples *‘Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up’ [verse 11]*. The disciples misinterpreted his words so Jesus had to tell them plainly: *‘Lazarus is dead’ [verse 14]*. And he added some important words *‘I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe’ [verse 15]*. The raising of a person from the dead would be a more convincing miracle than healing a sick person. This miracle just like those we have already considered had more than one purpose. Martha and Mary benefited by having their brother raised to life and as we read in verse 15 it was also to strengthen the faith of the disciples of Jesus. We would like to think that all those present at this event were affected by what they had witnessed, even many of the Jews who were sceptical of Jesus, believed [*verse 45*].

THE EXAMPLE OF MARTHA

Now let’s think about these events from Martha’s perspective. Martha being a follower of Jesus would have known about the miracles

Jesus had already performed. Her first words were: “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you.*” Jesus said to her, “*Your brother will rise again*” [verses 21-23].

Lazarus had been dead four days and there was certainly ambiguity in Jesus answer, designedly so as to try Martha's faith. But her sorrow and concern was for her brother as shown in her answer: ‘*I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day*’ [verse 24]. And if Martha had any further doubts, Jesus dispelled them in those reassuring words: ‘*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, even though he dies, he shall live*’ [verse 25]. This was partly illustrated in the miracle which Jesus then performed but more importantly, it was a sign of a marvellous resurrection to come, when Jesus will return and his faithful servants will be raised to eternal life.

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

So far we have looked at miracles as a means of demonstrating the authority of those who performed them. We now consider the most important miracle of all as far as we are concerned, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And why is it so important? The Apostle Paul sets it out for us. There were some people in the days of Paul who argued that there is no resurrection of the dead, and here is his convincing reply.

‘...if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen...And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!...Then also those who have fallen asleep (died) in Christ have perished.’

[I Corinthians 15.13-18].

Paul's teaching is that Jesus led a sinless life and he was the perfect sacrifice needed for the forgiveness of sins. If he hadn't been resurrected our sins could not be forgiven. The Scriptures are very clear that the wages of sin is death [Romans 6.23]. If all the faithful servants of old who dedicated themselves to God's service have done this for nothing, does this sound like a merciful and loving God? Jesus Christ had to be resurrected or else all God's promises would have counted for nothing.

WHY DOUBT THE POWER OF GOD?

There have always been those who poured scorn on these miracles and particularly the resurrection of Jesus. Would it be conceivable that men such as of the calibre of the apostles of Jesus, who were witnesses of these miracles and particularly the resurrection of Jesus, suffered cruel deaths themselves for what they saw and believed. Would they have suffered and died like that for a cause they thought might be false? No! Because some of them were also crucified for their beliefs. It is the Apostle Paul, the one especially chosen as the apostle to the Gentiles, who pointed out the far reaching implications of the greatest of all miracles: *‘(God) has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all, by raising him from the dead’ [Acts 17.31].*

What do we need to do today? There were those who put that very same question to Jesus: “...*what shall we do, that we may work the works of God?*” *Jesus answered and said to them. “This is the work of God, that you believe in him (Jesus) whom he (God) sent”’ [John 6.28, 29].* Through the miracles we have considered, there is ample evidence that we can have complete trust in the Bible as God’s message for us today.

We conclude with the admission of one man Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee (and Pharisees usually had no time for Jesus). But this Pharisee could not ignore **the evidence** he had seen.

‘This man (Nicodemus) came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs (miracles) that you do, unless God is with him”’ *[John 3.2].*

Can you afford to ignore that very same evidence?

Julian Crisp
Norfolk, England

Important Bible Words

Belief and Baptism

One of the core teachings of Jesus is about belief and baptism. Jesus said to his disciples before he left them to ascend to heaven, *‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. **He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned**’* [Mark 16.15,16]. This statement is very clear – to be saved, we must believe the gospel – that is the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ and then be baptized. This is the first step to salvation. In order to take this step, we must fully understand what it means.

Our objective in this article will be to show first, the necessity of correct **belief** prior to **baptism** and secondly, what baptism really consists of. **Belief and baptism**, followed by a demonstration of faith in God and obedience to His commandments, will in God’s mercy result in the salvation of the believer when Jesus returns to set up his Kingdom.

WHAT IS BELIEF IN THE GOSPEL?

The above verses from the gospel record of Mark clearly confirm to us that belief is an essential pre-requisite to baptism – belief in what? Jesus said *‘believe in the gospel’* [Mark 1.15]. Gospel means ‘good news’ and refers to the good news about two things – God’s kingdom and Jesus. In the book of Acts we read about the results of Philip’s preaching: *‘But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized’* [Acts 8.12].

As we study the Bible, we learn about the gospel and God's plan of salvation from the book of Genesis onwards. What are '*the things concerning... the name of Jesus Christ*'? Abraham was the father of the Jewish race and God made a promise to him that a descendant of his would rule the entire world in peace and that through him all nations of the earth would ultimately be blessed. This '*seed*' (descendant) of Abraham is Jesus [*Galatians 3.16*]. We read in the New Testament how his line of descent can be traced all the way back to David king of Israel and to Abraham [*Matthew 1.1*]. This promise concerning a '*seed*' was renewed to Abraham's sons Isaac and Jacob and later, promises were also made to David. God promised David that after his death:

'... I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever' [*2 Samuel 7.12, 13*].

When the Apostle Paul referred to David, he said, '*from this man's seed according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Saviour-Jesus*' [*Acts 13.23*]. So David's '*seed*' Jesus, is the future ruler over the kingdom of God on earth.

Belief in '*the things concerning the kingdom of God*' is also necessary before baptism. The promises made so long ago have yet to be fulfilled. Jesus the saviour will return to this earth to set up God's kingdom and so fulfil the promise God made to David. Jesus will sit on David's throne in Jerusalem and rule the world according to God's laws. The prophet Isaiah gives us many vivid word pictures of this glorious Kingdom age (read Isaiah 2.1-4; 11.1-9; 65.17-25). What a wonderful time to look forward to! If we truly believe what God tells us about Jesus and His Kingdom, our belief will prompt us to take action to be baptized.

When we look at the many churches in existence today, we see that what is called baptism is in most cases a sprinkling of water on the heads of infants. Infant baptism is not found in the Bible and it is problematic for several reasons. Later on, we will look at the true meaning of baptism and will see how infant sprinkling violates the real meaning behind the original Greek word for baptism. However, the baptism of infants poses another problem. Before a man or woman can truly be baptized, that person must have knowledge about God and His purpose. This knowledge also needs to be accompanied by belief - that is, the person must both know the facts about Jesus and God's kingdom and believe what he or she knows. Of course, a tiny baby cannot have very much knowledge about anything!



The Ethiopian eunuch is a prominent example in the New Testament of someone who wanted to be baptized. He was reading from the prophet Isaiah and when the Apostle Philip met him, they began to converse about the meaning of Isaiah's words. At first glance, this account in the book of Acts seems to indicate that little knowledge was required before someone was baptized:

'Now as they (Philip and the eunuch) went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may"...So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him' [Acts 8.36-38].

However, when the eunuch was baptized, he already possessed a great deal of knowledge about the gospel from his familiarity with the prophets of the Old Testament. After all, he had been reading from Isaiah when Philip met him. All that was further required, was a belief that Jesus was the promised Messiah who is mentioned so often in the Old Testament prophetic books such as Isaiah. The eunuch knew all his facts; the only requirement was that he must believe and then he could be baptized. Today we have the complete Bible – both Old and New Testaments telling us about the gospel. During the time when Jesus lived on the earth, people had what we know today as the Old Testament, to tell them about God. Much of the Old Testament also tells us about things connected with Jesus, so people of that time needed to believe that Jesus was the Messiah and that everything that the prophets foretold about him would come true.

Belief in the gospel must be accompanied by repentance. God wants us to truly feel sorry for our past sins and be humble enough to ask Him for forgiveness. Before an individual knows about God's Word and His commandments, that person will do many things that are contrary to God's laws. Therefore, when a person learns about God he or she must recognise their sinful state and repent of past sins done in ignorance of God's laws. This allows the person to be baptized with a clean heart, having sought forgiveness from God for all previous wrongdoing.

WHAT DOES BAPTISM REPRESENT?

Baptism is the divinely appointed ceremony for introducing believing sinners into the name of Christ. Paul wrote to the Galatians:

‘For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ’ [*Galatians. 3.27*].

It is one of the conditions of salvation taught by Christ and the apostles in the first century. Peter said ‘Repent, and let every one of

you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins’ [Acts 2.38]. On another occasion Peter commanded his hearers ‘*to be baptized in the name of the Lord*’ [Acts 10.48].

In baptism, we obtain the forgiveness of all past sins as Peter’s words in Acts chapter two remind us. Paul explained this in his letter to the Romans when he wrote: ‘*...do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?*’ [Romans 6.3] When we look at this aspect more closely, we can understand that Jesus died in order that sin might be destroyed. Although Jesus possessed our nature, he lived a perfect life without sin and yet submitted to death upon the cross. He therefore condemned sin in his own body and brought to mankind a hope of resurrection from the dead and the promise of eternal life (See Hebrews 9.26-28). For each of us to benefit from his redemptive work and have that promise fulfilled, we must become related to him in the way that God has appointed. **This can only be only by belief and baptism.** Paul continues in his letter:

‘Therefore we are buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of his death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of his resurrection...knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over him. For the death that he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life that he lives, he lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

[Romans 6.4,5, 9-11]

WHAT DOES BAPTISM CONSIST OF?

Baptism is an action requiring total immersion in water. In all cases

recorded in the Bible, those who asked for baptism, understood and believed the gospel message and then they were baptised into the name of Jesus Christ by the act of total immersion in water. This is supported by the example of Jesus himself who was baptised by John in the river Jordan [*Mark 1.9-11*].

Most churches would agree that baptism is essential to being saved. However, as mentioned earlier, in many cases it is administered to infants when a few days old in the form of sprinkled water. How did this practice originate? We have seen that Scriptural baptism involves total immersion, so it makes sense that there is absolutely no record of infant sprinkling in the Bible.

If we look at ecclesiastical history after the time of Christ, we find that the erroneous teaching that man has an immortal soul was introduced in the third century. It began to be taught that the righteous go to heaven and the wicked to hell when they die, doctrines which are not to be found in the Bible. It was therefore argued that if a child died before reaching an age of responsibility, it would be consigned to hell unless it had been baptized. A council held in the 3rd century AD resolved that baptism should be performed within the second or third day after birth since, if the child died prior to baptism, its soul would be lost. It was about the same time that the teaching was introduced that those who were in a weak state of health and could not endure total immersion in water could also be sprinkled with water.

This practice has prevailed ever since and gradually more and more churches have performed the rite of baptism by sprinkling instead of total immersion in water. In most cases, babies are sprinkled with water very early in their life. It should also be noted that this practice was derived from paganism. In Roman times, prior to the adoption of Christianity, a newly born girl on the eighth day after birth, and a boy on the ninth day, underwent a ceremony of purification with so called 'holy water' in order to protect them against sorcery.

It will help us to understand baptism if we look at the Bible word in the original Greek language. This word has nothing to do with so-called ‘christening’. The word baptism as used in the New Testament, is a translation of the Greek word **‘baptizo’** that means to dip or to plunge into a liquid. This word was used in the dyeing trade and referred to immersing a garment or piece of cloth into a liquid dye. The complete immersion of the garment into the dye resulted in a change of colour in the garment being dipped or ‘baptized.’

Another clear example that shows the meaning of the word **‘baptizo’** is a text from the Greek poet and physician Nicander, who lived about 200 BC. It is a recipe for making pickles and it is helpful because it uses this word **‘baptizo.’** In order to make a pickle, the vegetable was ‘baptised’ in a vinegar solution in order to make a permanent change.

What about believers then – does the water bring about a permanent change when we are baptized? No, there is nothing special about the water used in baptism and water in itself will not change us. However, the act of baptism symbolises a change from our former way of life to a new life committed to following God’s commandments. Baptism combined with belief in the gospel, a renunciation of former beliefs and a confession of our sins, will bring about a great change. As we read in Paul’s letter to the Romans, by being baptized, we are buried with Jesus by baptism into his death. As Jesus was in the grave for three days before being raised to eternal life, so in baptism we are ‘buried’ under water briefly, to rise up out of it to the hope of eternal life in God’s kingdom. By the forgiveness of sins and being admitted into covenant relationship with God and Christ, we begin a new life ‘in Christ’ (see Romans chapter 6).

Jesus likened baptism to being born again:

“...Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus said to

him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water, and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” [John 3.3-5].

This new life is a time of preparation for the gift of eternal life to be bestowed by Christ when he returns to set up the kingdom of God. Baptism is the way God has appointed for us to enter into this new life ‘in Christ’ but it is just the first step. Baptism washes away all previous sins and allows the believer to start a new life before God. After baptism, the believer is then committed to following as closely as possible the teachings of the Bible. This commitment needs to be put into practice every day of the believer’s life, since Jesus at his coming will judge all believers on their actions. Baptism links us to Jesus. It also links us to those faithful patriarchs of Israel mentioned earlier – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David who received Divine promises concerning their ‘seed’ or descendant the Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally belief, baptism and the commitment to live a new life ‘in Christ’ gives us the hope of entry into the wonderful kingdom that God has promised to set up on earth, as Paul reminded the Galatian believers:

‘For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.’

[Galatians 3.27, 29]

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Marvellous are Your Works

‘The spider skilfully grasps with its hands...’ [Proverbs 30.28].

THE way that some insects can climb up glass and walk on ceilings has long been a puzzle for biologists. Some produce a sticky substance to achieve this, but it has recently been found that the jumping spider has another method. Examination of its feet with an electron microscope revealed innumerable long hairs, each of which branched out into even finer hairs, called setules, which had triangular tips. The total number of these fine hairs on each tiny foot is about 600,000. This compares with an average of 100,000 hairs on the human head.



An electron microscope picture of the hairs on the tip of the spider's foot (left), and an even greater enlargement to show the individual setules with their triangular tips (right)

The researchers showed that these setules provide the means by which the spider can adhere to any surface. They calculated that when a spider is in contact with the ceiling through its approximately 600,000 setules, an adhesive force is set up capable of supporting 173 times its own body weight. In human terms this would be equivalent to a man hanging from a girder with one hand being able to support 173 people hanging on to his feet!

The adhesion is not achieved by any sort of glue, but through what physicists call the "van der Waals" force. This is a universal phenomenon consisting of an attraction that emerges between all molecules when they are very, very close together, in fact less than 1/1,000,000 of a millimetre apart.

Because of their structure each of those fine hairs is able to make this very close contact with the ceiling, and so the van der Waals attraction becomes operative. Although the attraction of each setule is very small, when it is multiplied by 600,000 times for each spider's foot, a force is achieved that is easily able to support the spider's weight.

The fact that so many minute hairs have been located in such a small area, and only on the spider's feet, reveals a marvel of design. The genetic information for the structure and production of these hairs is embedded in the spider's DNA and the cells in the sole of its foot produce the hairs in accordance with this design plan.

Would it have been possible for a spider of itself to come up with this design? Did a spider at an earlier stage of the alleged evolutionary process know about van der Waals forces, and after a series of experiments or chance events manage to utilise them in order to walk on ceilings? Could it have produced those special hairs on its feet by accident? Is it not much more reasonable to accept the existence of an all-wise Creator?

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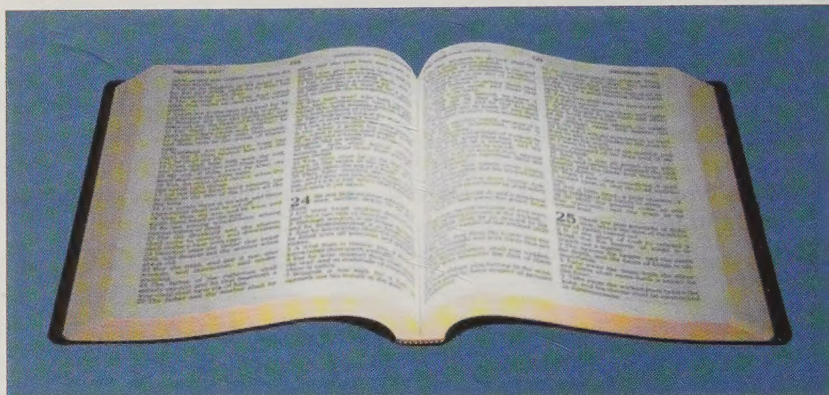
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